

Eyewitness **TO THE PAST**

Strategies for Teaching American History in Grades 5–12

JOAN BRODSKY SCHUR

Foreword by James A. Percoco

Stenhouse Publishers
Portland, Maine



Stenhouse Publishers
www.stenhouse.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Credits:

Page 30: John Adams diary 19, 16 December 1772 - 18 December 1773 [electronic edition]. Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>. Image reprinted by permission of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Page 184: "To Colored Men! Freedom, Protection, Pay, and a Call to Military Duty!" Recruiting poster in the U. S. National Archives and Records Administration Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94. Image courtesy of the U. S. National Archives and Records Administration website. www.archives.gov/education/lessons/black-civil-war.

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Pages 222 and 224: "Photo Analysis Worksheet" and "Cartoon Analysis Worksheet" courtesy of the U. S. National Archives and Records Administration Teaching with Documents website. www.archives.gov/education/lessons/.

Schur, Joan Brodsky.

Eyewitness to the past : strategies for teaching American history in grades 5-12 / Joan Brodsky Schur ; foreword by James A. Percoco.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-1-57110-497-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-57110-497-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. United States--History--Study and teaching (Secondary) 2. United States--History--Study and teaching (Secondary)--Activity programs. 3. Historiography--Study and teaching (Secondary)--United States. 4. United States--Historiography. I. Title.

E175.8.S37 2007

973.071--dc22

2006035224

Cover and interior design by Designboy Creative Group

Manufactured in the United States of America on acid-free paper

13 12 11 10 09 08 07 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my parents,

Samuel Brodsky and Margery Bach Brodsky,
who always make me feel proud to be a teacher.

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Foreword

On a blustery March day in 1832, along the banks of the Sangamon River, a lanky twenty-three-year-old politician put forth his hopes and ambitions for himself and the frontier town as he tacked up broadside after broadside announcing his candidacy for office. The young Abraham Lincoln addressed the question of education in his announcement arguing it “the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in.” One hundred and seventy-four years later, as we approach the bicentennial of the birth of the greatest leader developed by democracy, savvy New York City history teacher Joan Brodsky Schur would well agree with Mr. Lincoln.

In *Eyewitness to the Past* Schur examines and explains six multifaceted eyewitness strategies in her approach to teaching United States history. Through her methods, she shows students that learning can be fun and lead you to places you may never have imagined. Schur presents in six easy-to-read and singularly different chapters a way to not only instill historical and critical thinking skills in students, but also life skills. They are all here—reading, writing, team building, empathy construction, and plain old-fashioned good civic behavior. Her approaches are clever, well balanced, and reflect a sense of time-honored instructional strategies while at the same time immersing students in history. Good history teachers know that diaries from the past provide a unique window to distant times. In Chapter 1, not only do her students read historical diaries, they take on a historical persona, which permits them to see, feel, and touch the past in an appreciable way, grasping the importance of historical empathy. Chapter 2 cleverly weaves the use of historical travel narratives into the teacher’s tool kit. I particularly liked Schur’s detective-like sleuthing at flea markets to find old postcards to help her students visualize both time *and* place. In Chapter 3 students explore how people communicated to each other in a world before blogs, instant messaging, and email; they wrote letters the old-fashioned way and so, too, do Schur’s students. If you want to know how to pull off the ultimate group newspaper project, then Chapter 4 tells you how it can be done. Is persuasive writing part of your action plan for students? Chapter

5 provides tips not only for how to write a persuasive political speech, but how to get elected in the tumultuous process, while reliving the days of Andrew Jackson, Daniel Webster, and Henry Clay among others—with all the machinations and raucousness of early American politics, including banners, buntings, slogans, and songs. In Chapter 6 students study and create their own scrapbook across time, learning that this kind of personal archive project tells us not only about the person's life, but also about the time period in which he or she lived. In each of the strategies presented, Schur shows “teachers how they can make the study of history exciting by placing students in the shoes of ordinary people who, like we do now, lived in a state of suspense through tense times.”

The activities and strategies presented here do not exist in a vacuum separated from the history we are making. Schur helps students to see connections between the past and present, be it with political, military, or social history providing not only a sense of immediacy but relevancy as well.

In today's climate of high stakes testing and state-mandated standards, Schur provides a much-needed breath of fresh air. She is not faint of heart and is a teacher's teacher. She knows that believing in her students is the ultimate key to her success. Experienced teachers understand the power in believing in our students, and those new to the profession can glean much from her sage advice. A life-long learner herself, Schur knows the wisdom and value of learning from her students.

In *Eyewitness to the Past* you will find not only an array of productive, useful, and teacher-friendly strategies, but you will find as well solid suggestions as to how to assess and evaluate student work, complete with matching rubrics to help you help your history students become successful learners. If you are looking for alternate strategies to move you beyond the textbook, then you will find comfort and practicality in Schur's examples. Additionally, Schur's book is loaded with tips on how to use such Internet resources as ProQuest as both a research tool for investigating historical newspaper accounts and as a model for historical writing activities.

Tapping into best practices and history's habits of the mind helps her students to recognize that in history there is no such thing as monocausality—a singular and simplistic reason for events to unfold the way they did. Her

lessons provide students a way to understand and appreciate the complexity of history. In Schur's history laboratory, students look at all sides of an issue, weigh and evaluate evidence, and then offer hypotheses while being creative in the process. Like practicing historians, Schur's students conclude that there is no such thing as a definitive answer, but rather, an interpretation, which is an important acquired skill so necessary in a free, ever-evolving democratic society. Historians at their best are critical thinkers weighing and evaluating evidence that they uncover, making decisions based on the skills of their craft. In a complex society, it is vital that our young people recognize the power of such skills as they construct a history for their generation based on the groundwork laid by generations who have trod before them.

In an 1852 speech, Abraham Lincoln argued, "History is philosophy teaching by example." In *Eyewitness to the Past* you will clearly see how the ideas purported by Lincoln in the middle of the nineteenth century retain their dynamism and relevancy at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the hands of Joan Brodsky Schur.

James A. Percoco

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Acknowledgments

All of the people I wish to thank value what it means to be a teacher. Teachers need as much support as they can get, or at least I know I do, because we are too little valued by society at large. I have been a teacher for more than thirty years, but I could not have sustained a happy and productive life in the classroom without the encouragement of family, friends, colleagues, and a variety of institutions whose purpose it is to reach out to teachers. Teaching is hard work, but it is also terrific fun. The emotional and intellectual rewards of working with adolescents give as much meaning to my life today as when I started out.

This book could not have been written without my students at the Village Community School whose work appears in these pages. They are forever willing to follow my game plan, take risks with me, and let me know what does not work, as well as what does. No creative idea of mine can come to fruition without their steadfast efforts. For this I am deeply indebted to them. The class of 2005–2006, as well as students from previous years, gave me permission to publish their work. They know that I have changed their names so that I can discuss their work with complete honesty.

Students like those I teach do not exist in a vacuum. By the time they have reached the eighth grade, when I teach them American history, they have had the benefit of many gifted teachers at VCS. Over the years I learned from the consummate and inspiring teachers who taught many of my students before I did, including Sari Grossman, Jennifer Trano, and Nancy Beal Mostow. My colleagues in what we call the Upper School have all contributed to the teacher I have become. Thanks to Ron Ziff for his undying belief in the value of field trips; to Nova Gutierrez, who has stretched me to think in new ways; to Laura Shearer for the comfort of her friendship and the poetry of her teaching. I also want to thank many former colleagues. Dan Schuchat read the original proposal for this book and gave the publisher invaluable advice on it. As a board member of the National Council for the Social Studies, former colleague Syd Golston's passionate dedication to our field keeps me, as well as educators across the country, inspired. Finally, Andy Robinson and I shared the kind of teaching

partnership I hope every teacher can experience at least once in a lifetime.

Just as students do not learn in a vacuum, neither do teachers. Eve K. Kleger, Director of the Village Community School, has enabled me to explore new directions in my career, including the writing of this book. For this I am most grateful. Assistant Director Denise Frazier has provided me with her expert guidance in my new role as Social Studies Coordinator, in which capacity I am also grateful for the support of Melissa Gordon, school psychologist, and Jessica Spielberger, Director of the Upper School. There are also many former administrators who nurtured my work when they were at the Village Community School. The vision of Sheila E. Sadler, founding Director, continues to nourish all of us who worked with her. Janie Lou Hirsch, current Director of the Westland School in Los Angeles, kept me laughing while teaching me everything I needed to know about adolescents. Jeff W. Wallis encouraged me to take risks. Arthur Whitman never failed to show his appreciation for the hard work and talent of the teachers under his caring wing. I would also like to thank all my current colleagues from whom I continue to learn and with whom it is my great privilege to work.

The value of teaching with documents is an important theme throughout this book. I first explored the potential of using primary sources in the 1970s while working at the City & Country School in New York City. Their library collection is designed to facilitate teaching with documents, and my experiences there set me on the path to becoming the teacher I am now. In 1991 I attended the Primarily Teaching workshop at the National Archives, a program that has changed the lives of many teachers, including mine. No word of thanks would be complete without expressing my gratitude to Wynell Schamel for her inspiration then as well as for her continuing support. It was in 1998 that Lee Ann Potter took me into the digital age by inviting me to work with a group of remarkable educators to write lesson plans for the National Archives Digital Classroom website. It was a gift and a turning point in my career to work under her dynamic leadership. I am also extremely thankful for the wisdom of her feedback on the original proposal for this book. Kim Barbieri, Education Specialist at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, has been a cheerleader and helpmate over many years. Thomas Gray, an expert on teaching with documents, has extended his help to me at the drop of a hat on numerous occasions.

A number of the ideas I share in this book first appeared in articles I wrote for *Social Education*, where Michael Simpson's encouragement as well as insight into the needs of teachers were critical to their success. The ideas for other teaching strategies were first hatched while I was writing lesson plans for PBS under the keen guidance of Mary Kadera and Tim Walker. I also want to thank Mary for the opportunity to serve on the TeacherSource Advisory Group from 2002–2004. From her visionary thinking I learned how important it is to work on teams and to look ahead to the future of technology in education. I also want to thank Anne Harrington of WETA, the PBS station in Washington, D.C., who gave me the golden opportunity to write lesson plans for many documentaries by Ken Burns.

Writing the proposal for this book made me realize how very much I learned from my former editor at Lucent Books, Lauri Friedman. James A. Percoco's marvelous books on teaching American history inspired me to take the plunge and write my own. Danny Miller's original enthusiasm for this project is what set it in motion. A thanks to Erin Whitehead for her scrupulous and thoughtful work on the manuscript. Most of all I wish to thank Bill Varner at Stenhouse Publishers who spent many months patiently answering my many questions. His wise and consummate judgment helped the book take shape in many important ways.

The encouragement, support, and patience of many friends saw me through a long and hard year of writing. Among them are my sister and dearest friend, Alice Brodsky Forcier; Susan Gill, whose steadfast friendship I treasure; Christine Eickelman, who knows me as well as I know myself; Pamela Berge, with whom I shared much book talk throughout the year; and Sally Downs, whose hospitality I always value. Without the joyous encouragement of Irv and Sue Sarnoff I might never have written this book at all.

My daughter, Sarah Brodsky Schur, has always valued the importance of what I do in life, and her appreciation has meant a great deal to me over the years. I also want to thank the newcomer in our family, our little dog Phoebe, who sat patiently on the orange chair while I typed away.

To my husband, Edwin M. Schur, I owe the most thanks. He has appreciated how much teaching means to me over three decades. He led the way in showing me that teachers can develop a wide-ranging professional

life beyond their own classrooms. With the rigor of a lawyer and a professor and the gentleness of a helpmate, Ed taught me how to write, sentence by sentence, in the early years of our marriage. Thank you, Ed.